

XXI. The Future

Long ago, many ages before the ancestors of the Hùloril living upon the northern, windswept shores of the Great Lands first saw ships from the south with their painted prows and square sails bearing the bold eyes of their gods, carrying adventurers ever farther from their homeland in search of riches, and then imitated them in their own craft to ply their own seas, and long before even those southern men of such renown had felled the first trees that became the great fleets in which they sailed forth from ports and cities now forgotten by time, ruins on desert shores or else beneath the encroaching waters, others had trod upon the rocky shores of the Denkyali. These were the Ancient Ones, a race tall, proud, and fell. From the ocean they had come, borne hence by the western winds in a great wave that swept across all the lands abutting the Western Sea, their tall ships of sea and air bearing them unlooked-for to peoples who had long since forgotten the Time of Darkness, or the wars against the Others, of whom only the haunted ruins of their cities remained, ground to rubble by the wrath of the conquerors, and thus the peoples had no remembrance of them, and no understanding of what was to come. For the Ancient Ones had come, not for trade or for exploration, but for conquest, and they swept across the peoples of the world like fire, and subjugated all the lands facing the sea. And they plundered these lands, seizing from them what they could, felling trees, collecting crops and animals, digging metals and minerals from the ground, placing the yolk on the necks of the peoples, and all these things they dragged off to the rumored lands of the Ancient Ones, to their great cities in the west from which none ever returned. And their ships sailed across all the world, from the farthest lands of the south where different stars roam the skies, to the farthest north where the ever-frozen ice turns the sea into land and no ship can pass, nor man can live.

It was through their journeys in the far north that the Ancients chanced across a land distant from other, populated lands, where the sun was but a fleeting visitor in winter but a near-constant companion in summer, and yet it was warmed enough by the surrounding waters that the ice had not taken it, though the White Wall rose but a day's

journey away in winter. At that time, this land that would later be known as the Denkyali was but an uninhabited waste, and of seemingly little use to the Ancients, but still they built an outpost upon it, a warning beacon for their empire. For there were things in the dark corners of the world that even the Ancient Ones feared, for all their wealth and power, and upon the icy expanses beyond the White Wall walked remnants from the Time of Darkness against which all the weapons of the Ancients were of little use, things that, should they leave their frozen fastness, could quickly have undone much the Ancients had built. Vigilance was needed, and even at the height of their ambition and folly the Ancient Ones realized this. Until the end.

The tyrannical grip of the Ancient Ones on the Great Lands lasted for many lifespans of men, though after the first, sudden wave their empire grew more slowly as their assaults could no longer rely on the swiftness and surprise of their coastal conquests and the peoples, knowing of the hardships suffered by their subjugated neighbors, fought long and hard, begrudging their would-be conquerors every bit of ground, though in the end these peoples, too, fell, after the last of their warriors lay dead, trodden beneath the merciless feet of the oncoming hordes, in which most of those doing the killing were from peoples subject to the Ancient Ones themselves, and their bodies too lay scattered upon the wailing lands, prey for the beasts of the land and birds of the air. Such suffering was there that the peoples cried out to whatever gods they could find for succor.

In the end, though, it was not from without that the great empire of the Ancient Ones fell but from within, though only rumors of events reached the outer lands after the cataclysm that followed. It was said that a revolt had seized the capital of the empire, and that the High King of the Ancient Ones, he who had ruled for a thousand years and more, had been slain, killed by a slave girl aided by his own son, a deed that had thrown the empire into chaos and confusion as the Lords of the Ancient Ones strove amongst themselves for the throne, drawing in armies from all the edges of the empire. For the first time, the peoples of the Great Lands found themselves strong in the face of their oppressors while the might of the empire lay elsewhere, and the outer lands were convulsed with rebellion and war. And then, as if the

gods themselves had grown sickened by the slaughter that choked the lands, a star from the heavens plunged from the skies, and the seas rose up, and the wailing madness from beyond the White Wall was unleashed, and the old lands were destroyed, and most of the peoples with them.

But though untold numbers beyond count was lost, some few survived the calamitous destruction of those times, left to wander a world greatly altered from what they had previously known. In time, they began to collect together the things that remained of the Ancient Ones' rule. There were those among them who felt that these relics, things of power which had given the Ancients such strength, could be used to rebuild some of what was lost, but the wise saw the folly of this plan, for though such things could be used for good, for the betterment of the peoples' lives and for protection against the evils that roamed the world, no longer held in check by fear of the power of the Ancient Ones, so too could they bring a return to tyranny and the exploitation of the many by the few. And so wiser heads prevailed, and they gathered what they could and hid it away, scattered across the far places of the world so that no one person could stumble across enough to gain power such as no man should ever bear.

Among the surviving relics was a figure, a statue as of wind and water, carved from a gray-green rock of unknown origin. It was said that a spirit of old was bound to the thing, and that it could be commanded by its master to bring forth the sight of things far away, things long past and present, and even some that were to come. And when the eye was taken from the body it could see of its own, and relay to the master what was seen. It was said to have been made in the Time of Darkness as a weapon against the horrors of those days, and later to have been treacherously gifted to the Others before being used against them in war. Certainly, it was ancient beyond measure, and the secrets of its making were lost to time long before the empire fell. This the wise took and brought to the most distant of lands, and they buried the statue beneath the ground in the midst of the most distant isle, not so far from where the ruins of the Ancient Ones' outpost lay crumbling beneath the sea. But they set up the eye to watch over the north, and

put in place means by which their descendants could be warned, should any threat therefrom arise.

And so it stood, for age upon age, watching. And in time, people came again to the isles, which by then had grown warmer so that tress flourished upon them and the White Wall was now far distant and unvisited. And perhaps, once upon a time, the statue was even stumbled across by the people who lived there, though they knew not what it meant and dared not disturb it, for fear of the power within.

But in the depths of the world and beyond the world, the Darkness, which had never wholly been vanquished, was rising. In the beginning it was seen in small things that easily passed beneath the notice of those who counted themselves wise, the unexplained death of a child, the disappearance of the inhabitants of a village nestled on the edge of a dark forest, a strange plague that sprang from the sea. And in the north things were waking that had slept for years beyond count. And the eye, too, opened, and it saw.

And it found on that very isle at the edge of the world one like unto those who had crafted it so long before, a boy in whom the spark of the Ancients yet glowed, a dim echo of the terrible light that blazed through the long ages of strife and darkness. And it called to him, and he came, and it revealed to him its secrets. And a choice was given to the boy, whether to take it for himself and his ends, as the Ancients had of old, or to let it remain unused and dormant, as the wise had done, or to forget himself and his pains and losses and to think of those he had never seen, though the world had caused him little but pain.

And the boy chose the world, and hope.